

## **Galesburg Senatorial Debate, 1858**

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On October 7, 1858, in Galesburg, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas engaged in one of the greatest debates of all time. The battle was for the votes of Knox County for a U. S. Senate seat, which in the end threw its support to Lincoln. In this great clash, both men discussed controversial issues for three hours, but attention always returned to the topic of slavery.

Douglas, the expansionist, was intent on building the nation at any cost. Lincoln, a member of the newly formed Republican Party, held strong abolitionist views. These men, two of the most influential figures in American history, radically changed the way people understood major issues of the day.

Galesburg, the seat of Knox County, was a comparatively small town in 1858. On that October morning, the air was festive and the streets crowded with people. Most cheered for Lincoln. Douglas rode to town on the Burlington train, accompanied by a motley assortment of Lincoln and Douglas supporters. Lincoln arrived with the Knoxville delegation and was met by fellow Republicans as well as the military, creating a procession so long that “mammoth would not describe it. It was like one of Cobb’s tales, of monstrous length and *to be continued.*” This was the report of the *Galesburg Semi-Weekly Democrat*. At two o’clock sharp, both men arrived at the platform in four-horse carriages, accompanied by the military and crowds of their own supporters. The debate began at 2:30.

Douglas, who had been allotted one half-hour for his arguments spoke first. He stated his support for both the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the compromise measures of 1850. He also explained that he fought against the Lecompton Constitution, one of four proposals for admitting

Kansas into the Union. The Lecompton Constitution would welcome Kansas as a slaveholding state, although voters would have the right to choose whether more slaves would be allowed. To this, Lincoln had no reply. Presumably, he agreed with both the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Compromise of 1850. Abandoning rational argument for personal attack, Douglas then accused Lincoln of changing both policy and philosophy in different parts of the state, playing abolitionist in the north and “old-line Whig” in the south. Lincoln countered by saying that his argument remained exactly the same in Chicago as in Jonesboro. Douglas then responded that even if Lincoln *did* have a consistent argument, it still must be untrue. Lincoln replied by saying “The only evidence he [Douglas] has of their [Lincoln’s ideas] being wrong is in the fact that there are people who won’t allow us to preach them. I ask again, is that any way to test the soundness of a doctrine?”

Moving past personal attack, Lincoln refuted Douglas’ arguments. Lincoln described himself as someone who wished to see slavery abolished. Though he conceded that the black man was “inferior” intellectually to whites, Lincoln still believed that all men should be treated equally. He concluded his presentation by stating that race should have no effect on a man’s rights, that no one had ever said, when writing the Constitution, that the black man was not included in it. “And I will remind Judge Douglas and this audience that while Mr. Jefferson was the owner of slaves, as undoubtedly he was, in speaking upon this very subject, he used the strong language that ‘he trembled for his country when he remembered that God was just.’” Lincoln clearly identified with the abolitionist movement. Though it was more popular in the northernmost section of the state, most of the south favored Douglas’ expansionist policy. Because Illinois was bordered by two slave states, albeit not ones that would secede in the Civil War, almost any point south of Charleston was sympathetic to the Confederacy or pro-slavery, and this helped Douglas win the debates as a whole.

To conclude, the debate at Galesburg clarified the speakers' views on black rights. Though Douglas provided valid arguments, most of the Galesburg area was predisposed toward Lincoln and the abolitionist movement. Even so, Douglas' words were transcribed, read in other parts of the state, and persuaded other people. Thus, despite Lincoln winning the Galesburg debate, Douglas won the Senate seat. Both Lincoln and Douglas changed the way many people viewed major issues, and they helped bring the country to where it is today, slave-free and with equal rights for all people. [From Edward Finch, "Lincoln-Douglas Debates." *Lincoln-Douglas Society*. 200. <<http://www.lincoln-douglas.org/>> (Oct. 8, 2007); William E. Foote, "The Galesburg Debate." *Daily Pantagraph* [Bloomington, IL] 13 Oct. 1858. <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.2284:1.lincoln>> (Oct. 8, 2007); "Galesburg Debate. Great Outpouring of the People! 20,000 Persons Present!" *Galesburg Semi-Weekly Democrat* 9 Oct. 1858. <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.2003:1.lincoln>> (Oct. 8, 2007); J. Harding, "Debate at Galesburg." *Prairie Beacon News* 22 Oct. 1858. <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.2000:1.lincoln>> (Oct. 8, 2007); and Abraham Lincoln, and Stephen Douglas. "Fifth Debate." *Lincoln Home National Historic Site*. National Park Service. <<http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debate5.htm>> (Oct. 8, 2007).]